



Agricultural Environmental Management ***Praising Grazing!***

By Barbara Silvestri

Much of the northeast's terrain is ideally suited to pasturing animals, and farmers statewide have long trusted grazing as an efficient, cost effective method of providing high-quality feed for their livestock. A well-managed pasture system can also protect the environment by reducing soil erosion, protecting water quality and enhancing wildlife habitat.

However, overgrazing and livestock access to streams can lead to environmental concerns. New York's Agricultural Environmental Management (AEM) program can provide the tools and resources to assess your pasture conditions and direct you to local experts who can help you maximize the benefits grazing provides to both your farm and your watershed.

So what do we mean by a "well-managed pasture system"? The idea of prescribed grazing management is to carefully control the harvest of forages by livestock, using the best physical lay-out of pastures and a custom-tailored grazing schedule. A prescribed grazing system can optimize livestock use of forages while also optimizing environmental benefits because:

- Carefully managing the time livestock spend in each pasture and allowing the proper amount of time for regrowth keeps vegetation healthy.
- Pasturing versus mechanical harvest also reduces input costs and air pollution from the use of fossil fuels.
- Converting highly-erodible lands in row crop production to year-round vegetative cover (pasture and hayland) can provide quality feed at less cost and labor while reducing soil erosion and water pollution.
- Managing livestock access to streams and other waterbodies protects water quality and enhances herd health.

Conducting an AEM Risk Assessment, including the Pasture Management Worksheet, will help you examine your pastures to determine where improvements can be made to protect water quality and enhance farm efficiency. Many farms find that their pastures are already doing a great job of protecting water quality, and that any necessary changes are mainly management issues.

Improvements can be as simple as management changes to benefit pasture productivity and profitability. If a more detailed prescribed grazing plan or costly physical changes are needed, and your farm is in New York State, AEM can help you access the necessary technical and financial resources.

A few examples of changes that might be recommended are:

- New pasture management techniques or new pasture layouts when pastures are being overgrazed or when laneways are showing signs of erosion.
- A constructed laneway or stone crossing to minimize water pollution when livestock must cross a stream.
- An alternative water supply if animals are relying on the stream for water.
- Optimizing fertilizer rate, timing and method of application to enhance economic returns while protecting water quality.

Why not schedule a free, confidential AEM Risk Assessment for your farm, including the Pasture Management Worksheet? AEM can help you protect water quality and can even benefit your bottom line by increasing the efficiency of your pasture system. New York farmers can contact your County Soil and Water Conservation District to learn more about pasture management and to schedule an AEM Risk Assessment.

To learn more about AEM, view the Worksheets, including the Pasture Management Worksheet, or to locate your Conservation District office, visit: www.nyssoilandwater.org. Check the next issue of Small Farm Quarterly for more information on how AEM can support you in reaching your farm's economic and environmental goals.

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